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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [GAZA](#) [DISENGAGEMENT](#) [GOI](#) [INTERNAL](#) [GOI](#) [EXTERNAL](#) [ISRAEL](#) [RELATIONS](#)

SUBJECT: REACTION TO BUSH-SHARON MEETING: SHARON GOT WHAT HE NEEDS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Richard LeBaron for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Key Likud disengagement supporters and the major media are declaring PM Sharon victorious after learning of the assurances Sharon received in his April 14 meeting with President Bush. They also assess that Sharon obtained what he needs from the U.S. to push his disengagement plan through a fractious Likud Party referendum on the unilateral withdrawal plan slated for May. While the small group of hardest-core disengagement opponents from across Likud and the two rightist coalition partners dismiss the USG assurances as inadequate and nothing new, key Likud fence straddlers on disengagement appear to be moving in favor of the plan. FinMin Netanyahu, while not yet definitively expressing support for the plan, reportedly stated he is satisfied with President Bush's assurances, including on the Palestinian refugee issue. Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres is embracing President Bush's position, declaring that it "conforms to the Labor Party's positions," clearly signaling Labor's readiness to join a Likud-led coalition. End summary.

Key Players Satisfied

¶2. (C) Key Likud supporters of PM Sharon and his controversial unilateral disengagement plan are thrilled with the assurances Sharon received from President Bush April 14 in exchange for moving forward with his unilateral withdrawal plan. Defense Minister Mofaz announced on April 14 that "Today marks an important milestone toward creating a new and improved political and security reality for Israel. One should welcome these significant and unprecedented understandings that were reached... which... anchor extremely vital Israeli political and security interests." (Note: PM Sharon's son and Likud MK, Omri Sharon, told poloff on April 14, prior to the Washington press conference, that the Defense Minister would play a leading role in the pro-disengagement referendum campaign to lend credibility to Sharon's assurances that the plan would boost Israel's security.) Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared that President Bush's letter constitutes a historic achievement.

¶3. (C) Several Likud ministers who had been straddling the fence on the withdrawal plan indicated after the release of the White House assurances that they can now support it. In an Israel radio report on April 15, Netanyahu reportedly expressed satisfaction with President Bush's assurances, even though they do not explicitly address one of Netanyahu's conditions for supporting the plan: that there be no withdrawal from Gaza until the separation fence -- in a route that includes the Ariel settlement bloc -- is completed. Netanyahu has not yet, however, come out squarely in support of Sharon's plan. Immigrant Absorption Minister Tzipi Livni, one of the undecided Likud ministers, reportedly announced that with the U.S. assurances particularly regarding views on right of return, she would support the disengagement plan. Education Minister Limor Livnat, still holding out, said she would reserve judgment on the U.S. assurances and the plan until she sees "exactly what was said." PM Sharon called key Likud leaders from Washington. He reportedly announced that he will meet with Likud ministers about the plan on April 16, when he returns from the U.S.

¶4. (C) Labor Party Chairman Shimon Peres openly embraced President Bush's April 14 statements and the U.S. assurances, reportedly stating that "President Bush's speech almost completely conforms to the Labor Party's positions calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with minor border adjustments which take into consideration the Jewish settlements in the territories and Israel's security needs." He added that President Bush's statement on the Palestinian right of return also conforms with Labor's position. Peres' statements set the stage for Labor joining a Likud government if and when the rightist parties bolt. Justice Minister Tommy Lapid, leader of the coalition partner Shinui Party, praised President Bush's assurances, stating that they "bolster Israel's standing in exchange for Sharon's disengagement plan."

Disengagement Opponents Discount U.S. Assurances

15. (SBU) Not surprising were the responses by ideological opponents of unilateral withdrawal both from those on the right opposed to withdrawing from settlements, and those on the left opposed to moving forward without negotiating with the Palestinians. Housing Minister Eifi Eitan of the rightist coalition partner National Religious Party, dismissed President Bush's and PM Sharon's statements as "word games" that "do not provide a response to the security threats and the unbearably high economic price of the plan." Another leader in the anti-disengagement plan campaign, Likud Minister-without-Portfolio Uzi Landau, referred to President Bush's statements as "sadly inadequate... which contain nothing new." He called on Likud ministers to help foil the plan. MK Yuri Stern of the rightist National Union coalition party, assessed that PM Sharon "failed to attain any strategic achievement even from a friendly President like Bush." Yossi Sarid of the leftist Meretz party said that he "fail(s) to see anything new in the U.S. stand," although new left-wing Yahad party leader Yossi Beilin reportedly stated that "Bush's statements constitute a basis for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement."

Media Declares Victory for Sharon

16. (U) Israeli media commentary universally portrayed Wednesday's events as a major victory for Sharon. The leading pundits underlined the historic importance of what they defined as unprecedented U.S. statements rejecting the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees to Israel. Many also saw in the President's remarks the first statement by a U.S. leader legitimizing the settlements, although Ze'ev Schiff of Ha'aretz and Ben Caspit of Ma'ariv cautioned that the President's language on territorial issues, such as recognizing demographic realities on the ground, could apply as much to the reality of expanding Palestinian areas of Jerusalem as to the settlements.

17. (SBU) Going beyond the substantive issues, commentators stressed the political side of Wednesday's meeting. "No one can allow himself the luxury of not meddling in the other's elections," Yedioth's Nahum Barnea noted. Sharon was seen as receiving a big boost toward winning approval of the disengagement initiative in the coming Likud referendum, not only from the President, but also from the strident Palestinian and Arab reaction to the President's statements. Commentators saw Sharon reciprocating with his statement praising the President's steadfastness against terror, and with his refusal to meet with Sen. Kerry.

Comment

18. (C) Judging from the positive statements by key coalition and Likud players, such as Netanyahu, and major media analysts, U.S. assurances provided PM Sharon a surfeit of ammunition to convince Likud voters to support his disengagement plan in next month's referendum. As the major daily Yedioth Ahronoth put it, "Bush gave Sharon words, only words, but what words."

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LeBaron